

Vendors hawk wares that stray far from traditional gaming fare

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While hundreds of blinking slot machines got most of the attention when the trade show floor opened for business at Global Gaming Expo Tuesday, other vendors that supply the growing casino industry also fought for attention amid the crowd.

JCM American Corp., the largest maker of bill acceptor devices for slots, used a magician to attract attendees to its booth. "Don't be fooled by overpriced, flashy imitations," the man said as one of his cards appeared to float in the air.

Nearby, competitor MEI, which is attempting to capture market share from JCM with its own bill acceptor, brought in a NASCAR stock car featuring a simulated video game ride for convention-goers.

"The days of (JCM) having 90 percent market share are over," Philip Wesel, a global gaming marketing manager for MEI, said over the simulated roar of an engine. Wesel, like the rest of the company's reps, wore an outfit resembling a NASCAR pit crew worker. "Our booth has a performance theme," he said. "We're letting casinos have a free test drive. We're (advertising) less than one jam in 80,000 (bills)."

At the casino industry's largest trade show, hundreds of vendors were on hand displaying wares that had nothing to do with gambling but have become part of the all-encompassing casino experience of dining, shopping and entertainment.

Pioneered by the Mirage resort in Las Vegas, synthetic plants have grown from a small specialty product into a major growth industry and have helped an increasing number of resorts create a refreshing, escapist landscape indoors.

One of these specialists, NatureMaker Inc. President Gary Hanick, tapped away on his laptop near the "shade" of a strangling fig tree.

The Carlsbad, Calif., company, which specializes in creating handcrafted, steel-framed trees, has branched out from museums, shopping centers and restaurants to include casinos such as Mandalay Bay.

The company invented a material for trees it crafted for its first casino client, the Mirage, in the late 1980s.

"We're a niche within a niche within a niche," Hanick said. "The savvy client takes the best of everyone and makes it work. The more collaboration, the better -- especially in this business."

Nearby, Carrie Hogan, a sales representative for The Plantworks, passed out rose petals in a booth featuring elaborate shrubs and other plants.

"We can make it look more real than the real thing -- you can bend it and shape it," she said of the plants. The company also sells preserved plants in

addition to synthetic ones -- both of which "just require some dusting" to look fresh again.

The small company's client list is large and includes Green Valley Ranch, MGM Grand and Mandalay Bay. Tuesday, Hogan made a few contacts with casinos in Austria and Russia.

"Word gets around," she said.

Flanked by a giant fiberglass mermaid, Christopher Foster ticked off a client list that has grown in recent years to include more than 20 tribal casinos nationwide, including the Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun resorts.

Simulated stone and wood maker Cost of Wisconsin Inc. more recently created waterfall displays for the Silverton's Bass Pro Shops retail store and crafted an oversized pair of women's shoes for a retail shop at Wynn Las Vegas.

"It's been slower in gaming than the past year," said Foster, director of sales and marketing. "We're seeing more competition."

But competition among casinos will ensure business for designers, who can add something different for customers. And no particular theme or look is off-limits, Foster said.

"It all comes down to personal preference," he said.

Nearby, convention-goers nibbled on hors d'oeuvres and drank beverages supplied by food companies hoping for a bigger piece of the growing casino industry.

Gourmet food distributors rubbed shoulders with Cinnabon, Burger King and Subway. Conventioneers mixed wine with tropical drinks and sodas.

But no one had a spread quite like ChocoFountain Inc., a Nebraska-based company that makes fountains of melted chocolate that run down rotating metal displays.

As conventioneers dipped pieces of fruit into the chocolate pool collecting at the bottom, company President Andy Znamenacek said he broke into the casino business a few months ago with a buffet fountain at Ameristar Casinos' property in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

"There's a lot of interest in this," he said. "Casinos are looking at having it at buffets, conventions, even weddings. We're very happy we made it to this show."

Nearby, snappy cocktail server uniforms and chef outfits competed for attention at a booth operated by Red The Uniform Tailor, a New Jersey company that is going up against industry giant Cintas.

The company began in 1977 supplying law enforcement uniforms and now makes custom uniforms for everyone from the military to casinos and theme parks like Universal Studios.

"We're trying to break into Las Vegas," said Tracy Gluck, vice president of Red's hospitality division. "Some people don't know about us because we're not based in town."

Island Oasis, which makes natural tropical fruit drink mixes for restaurants, schools and churches, also supplies many casinos including the downtown Las Vegas properties known for their inexpensive daquiris.

But Island Oasis, which has been serving Las Vegas since 1992, also can be found behind the bar at Mandalay Bay -- where a fancy pina colada can set you back at least \$8 for a drink that costs less than \$1 to make.

Business is good, and the Massachusetts company is hoping to pick up even more clients like it did at last year's show, Las Vegas sales representative Kelly Berry said.

"A frozen drink in Vegas -- you can't beat that," he said.

But some conventioners may have found something better at a nearby booth, which featured several large massage chairs with drink holders.

The chairs, made by Massage Manufacturers Direct Inc. of San Jose, Calif., were envisioned for places like car washes where people have to wait around but have so far been a surprise success for Andrew Spresser, who has purchased several of the chairs for Arizona casinos.

"That's where they work best -- casinos," said Spresser. "I put them by bingo halls and card rooms."

Company President Jesse Tsai, whose chairs sell for about \$2,000 but can be rented by casinos that can share half of the profit, said the chairs still need some time to catch on.

"We're new to a lot of people," Tsai said. "We're giving people free massages. Some people are telling me they want to buy one for their own homes."

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